FD-350 (Rev. 7-16-63)

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Acquaintances Tell Of Garrison Witness

By BILL BANKSTON

A Baton Rouge man who approached the State-Times before talking with Orleans Dist. Atty. Jim Garrison has emerged as a star witness in the district attorney's probe of the Kennedy assassination.

Perry Raymond Russo, 23, of 811 E. State St., appeared in court yesterday and named Lee Harvey Oswald, Clay Shaw and David W. Ferrie as plotters in the death of President John F. Kennedy.

The young insurance salesman is described as a baseball buff with a burning interest in politics.

He also has a keen interest in hypnotism and music.

Steve E. Derby, a sophomore at LSU who knows Russo well, said the witness, "can do anything he puts his mind to."

Derby further described Russo as "quite a salesman" and said, "He likes to get up in front of people and speak."

"We usually go under identities of stepbrothers, but actually we are third cousins," Derby said.

It is easier to tell people they are stepbrothers than to go into an explanation of their relationship as third cousins, Derby said.

Brother at LSU

Russo's true brother, Edwin Russo, an engineering instructor at LSU, described the witness as "extremely popular."

Russo, 23, said his younger brother always had plenty of friends and was elected vice president of his class at McDonogh High School in New Orleans one year "with something like a 60 to 70 vote."

The elder brother lives here with his wife and three children, including 14-month-old twins.

They do not see each other very often, according to the brother.

"We get along but we're not close," the brother said.

The older brother also said that Derby was not related to the family.

"A real fine guy, a hard worker, an intellectual," is the way Russo's supervisor at the Equitable Life Assurance Co. described the witness.

Mrs. Ellmore Durand, who lives next to Russo in a white frame duplex near the LSU campus, said he was a "nice young kid. He told us he's helping his younger brother through high school."

Athletic Scholarship

Derby lives in Broussard Hall at LSU and has a partial athletic scholarship. He has been pegged as the possible starting second baseman with the Tiger baseball team this season. The criminology major told reporters that Russo is helping him through school. He listed his home address as Russo's.

Derby said he was present last week at the district attorney's office in New Orleans during questioning.

He said he saw a physician "hypnotize" Russo — explaining he meant Russo received sodium pentothal, called truth serum.

Questioning under the drug lasted about an hour and a half, he said.

Russo has stated he is interested in hypnotism and that Ferrie could hypnotize people.

Asked how the investigation had affected Russo, Derby said "After it began to develop, it seemed to upset him a bit. He's the type of guy who doesn't like to hurt anybody.

"He's the sole man that's condemning this man (Shaw)," Derby said.

Derby said Russo had been provided with a bodyguard the last two days.

Baseball Is First Love

"He is a real smart and has a lot of interests — baseball, music and politics. Politics is his second love," Derby said. Baseball is his first love, according to the student.

Russo did not have much confidence in himself in sports, according to Derby. He usually coached rather than played.

Russo organized and coached several teams with the New Orleans Baseball Academy and the Metropolitan League in New Orleans.

In 1965 Russo coached the Gentilly team in the Metropolitan League. It was sponsored by the Young Republican Club of which Russo was a member.

Derby said he played shortstop on the team and that it came in second in the league.

The student said he got to know Russo about five years ago when his family moved to New Orleans. Derby's father was in the army and worked at the New Orleans airport before retiring.

Derby said he had seen Ferrie a few times but that he never really talked to him. "He sort of scared you a little bit," Derby said.

Grew Up in Gentilly

Russo grew up in the Gentilly section of New Orleans. He attended Our Lady Star of the Sea elementary school and then McDonogh.

He entered Tulane University and transferred to Loyola University of the South, receiving a degree in political science in 1964.

Russo then attended Loyola Law School. Before going to work for Equitable, he was employed by General Electric in one of its finance divisions.

His father is Francis Russo, a machinist. His mother died in 1962, and a sister, Frances, died of polio when she was 12.

Russo's brother said he thought the witness is now attending two courses at LSU, paid for by the insurance company.

The brother said Derby and Russo "probably go together

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State Times
Baton Rouge, La.

SENT BUREAU
MM
SL

Date: 3-15-67
Edition:
Author:
Editor:
Title: ASSASSINATION OF PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY 11/22/63
Character:
or
Classification: 89-
Submitting Office: N.O.

☐ Being Investigated

SEARCHED ____ INDEXED ____
SERIALIZED ____ FILED ____
MAR 1 - 1967
FBI — NEW ORLEANS

89-65A-25

because of their mutual interest in baseball."

Russo was reared as a Catholic but couldn't be called a practicing member of the church now, his brother said.

The brother said he learned of Russo's involvement in the Garrison probe through the newspapers.

The instructor said he believes his brother's story. "It sounds like Perry. I believe he's telling the truth."

Moved in Last Fall

Russo moved into his present residence last fall. Mrs. Durand said, "Lots of young folks come in there and have a party once in a while."

A young boy who lives on the other side of Russo said Russo and Derby seemed like "nice guys." He said Russo had bought a motorcycle for Derby. It as parked in front of the residence yesterday.

Russo told the State-Times he became acquainted with Ferrie through a friend who was a member of the Civil Air Patrol.

Ferrie, a pilot, was active in the CAP.

The friend's family, asked him, Russo said, to try to "break Ferrie's hold" on their son.

Russo said he succeeded and that Ferrie threatened him, but on a later date appeared friendly again. Russo said he had known Ferrie about 18 months when in the fall of 1963, the pilot said, "We will get him (Kennedy), and it won't be long."

He told reporters that he thought nothing about the statement until he saw Ferrie's picture in connection with the Garrison probe.

Russo wrote a letter to Garrison on Feb. 23 stating he might have some information about the case. Ferrie was found dead in his apartment Feb. 22.

Russo again talked to a State-Times reporter March 3 at the East Baton Rouge Parish Courthouse.

He was inquiring at the sheriff's office about obtaining a permit to carry a gun.

Russo had little to say, but indicated he had become more deeply involved in the case. He said he had been in Garrison's office most of the previous week looking at photographs.

Today, deputies shifted to a physical search of newsmen and others entering the courtroom. Yesterday, they had relied upon a heavy metal detection device.

Heyd said another reason for tighter security precautions is that a loaded 22-caliber revolver was found yesterday near Shaw's car in the parking lot.

Heyd told reporters all principals in the case will be brought into the courtroom through the sheriff's office in the basement of the Criminal Courts building on Tulane Avenue.

About 30 deputies are stationed around the courtroom to keep an eye on spectators and the scores of newsmen.

Russo, the mystery witness Dist. Atty. Jim Garrison promised when he arrested Shaw (now free on $10,000 bond), said yesterday the assassination plot was perfected by Shaw, Lee Harvey Oswald and David Ferrie, who died of natural causes under mysterious circumstances a week after the district attorney had linked him to the murder conspiracy.

State-Times Interview

Russo, who did not mention Oswald in a State-Times interview on Feb. 24 of this year, yesterday said he knew him as "Leon" Oswald and Shaw as "Clem Bertrand."

Russo said he met the pair while visiting in Ferrie's New Orleans partment in September, 1963. He explained he and Ferrie were good friends and visited each other often between 1960 and 1964, when he moved to Baton Rouge.

Russo volunteered information on the alleged assassination plot to the State-Times on Feb. 24, just a few hours after he had mailed a letter to Dist. Atty. Garrison. Russo was not called to give the district attorney information about Ferrie and other persons involved in an assassination plot until two days after his voluntary interview appeared in the State-Times.

About three score newsmen, many from foreign countries, heard Garrison lead his key witness through a series of objections from Dymond and Edward Wegmann, attorneys for Shaw. But, Garrison did not ask the key question—whether Russo had knowledge that the trio actually put into operation their presidential murder plans.

Garrison apparently is basing his whole case on Russo's testimony. However, it is a strong point of speculation here that Garrison had contended he had the case wrapped up long before talking to Russo for the first time the last week in February.

Yesterday, Garrison announced at 3 p.m. he had concluded the presentation of prosecution testimony and turned Russo over to the attorneys for Shaw for cross examination. Garrison did not call for testimony from prosecution witnesses Dr. Nicholas Chetta, Orleans Parish coroner, and Dr. Esmond Fatter, a private physician.

However, it is believed he may ask them to be witnesses during rebuttal testimony.

Denied Knowing Oswald

Russo denied late in February that he knew Lee Harvey Oswald, the Dallas resident who has been named by the Warren Commission as the lone killer of the President in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963.

However, he testified yesterday he knew Oswald as "Leon" Oswald and Shaw as "Clem Bertrand."

In a dramatic moment of the hearing yesterday, Russo pointed out Shaw as the man he knew as Bertrand, then walked behind Shaw's chair in the courtroom and put his hand above Shaw's head to again positively identify him as one of the three co-conspirators.

The hearing, which may end today, was requested by Garrison to determine whether a three-judge district court, composed of Judges Bernard Bagert, Malcolm O'Hara and Matthew Braniff, should hold Shaw for trial on conspiracy charges.

Russo yesterday said assassination plot was hatched late one night after guests at a party in Ferrie's apartment had dispersed.

He said Ferrie initiated the conversation about the Kennedy assassination plot. "He just kept pacing up and down," Russo said.

He said Ferrie stressed a need for diversionary tactics in an assassination attempt, showing how Ferrie held up three fingers of one hand to emphasize that there would have to be a minimum of three people involved.

The Baton Rouge insurance salesman said Ferrie outlined how two of the three persons would fire diversionary shot and the third would get "the good shot" at the President.

Would Need 'Scapegoat'

He said Ferrie said several times that one of the three would have to be the "scapegoat." Asked for clarification on this point by Garrison, the 25-year-old Baton Rouge man said Ferrie meant that one of the three would have to be "sacrificed."

Oswald was arrested shortly after the assassination of the President and charged not only with killing President Kennedy, but with the murder of Dallas City Policeman J. D. Tippett.

Russo said the plot hatched in Ferrie's apartment was to sacrifice one of the three conspirators so that the other two could escape during the confusion. He says the plan decided upon was for Ferrie to fly the escapees to Mexico, refuel, and then fly on to Brazil.

He said the trio discarded a plan to fly directly to Cuba from Dallas because they feared the Cubans would shoot down the plant without asking questions.

Russo exlained that the trio spoke freely in front of him in making their assassination plans, because Ferrie vouched for him as a friend who did not know anthing about their ultimate aims. Garrison did not ask Russo if he heard additional planning by the trio prior to the day of the assassination.

Yesterday afternoon, Garrison introduced in evidence a bolt action rifle with a large telescopic sight. He asked Russo whether the rifle was similar to one he saw Oswald oiling in Ferrie's apartment on one occasion.

Russo replied he had only a brief glimpse of the weapon, but it looked similar. However, he said the sight of the rifle produced yesterday was much larger than the one Oswald was handling.

Garrison at this point dropped the questioning about the rifle and Shaw's attorneys did not ask any questions.

Russo's name does not appear in the National Archives in Washington among the hundreds of persons questioned by the Warren Commission which concluded that Oswald was the lone assassin of Kennedy. The FBI declined comment on whether it had ever questioned Russo.